The future of contemporary dance is rooted in classical Indian movement

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Anyone looking for a glimpse at the future of 21st century dance should go this week to Centre Pierre-Peladeau to see Akram Khan and nine other members of his London-based company. They're performing Ma, his work from 2004, a prominent example of the kind of cultural and stylistic fusion that's becoming the defining characteristic of contemporary dance.

At 32, Khan is one of Europe's fastest-rising young choreographers. An accomplished dancer (Montreal saw him for the first time in a solo, Sounds of Archery, at the Musee d'art contemporain three years ago), Khan formed his own company in 2002. He's already earned an impressive list of awards, including London's South Bank Show award for Ma.

Better testimony to his talent than awards is the fact established world-class artists are willing and eager to work with him. The dean of American composers, Steve Reich, collaborated with him recently on a piece to mark his 70th birthday. This year, Khan and the genius choreographer of Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, Lin Hwai Min, collaborate on a piece involving the celebrated French ballerina, Sylvie Guillem.

Clearly Khan is a man not only with something to say but with a vocabulary that draws attention to his message. Like all of his work, Ma has roots in Khan's study of the Indian classical dance called Kathak. Originally, Kathak dancers were Brahmin priests who told stories of their religion through spoken passages, mime and spontaneous rhythmic dancing to the accompaniment of a tabla drummer. Born and raised in London by parents from Bangladesh, Khan was urged by his mother to begin Kathak at age seven.

"I was already doing quite a bit of Bangladeshi folk dancing," Khan recalled in a telephone interview this week from London. "She wanted me to do something more solid with discipline." At the time, nothing really attracted him to Kathak, he admitted, other than being the centre of attention as the only boy in a class of 30 girls. But over the course of a dozen years, he learned how to perform Kathak's complicated rhythmic movements called bolas and to sing texts in Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu. Kathak's multicultural aspect was an extension of life at home.

"My father was a big fan of Bollywood, so I watched Bollywood films in Hindi. My mother liked Urdu poetry and songs. To me, it was a confusion of languages happening in the same room." Ma is Khan's attempt to transform Kathak's fusion of dance, music and text into a contemporary idiom whose movements - sometimes lyrical, sometimes vigorously athletic - can express both humour and drama.

"As a Kathak dancer, you're the musician, the conductor and also the actor - you're all three," said Khan, noting that India's concept of dance, unlike the West's, does not separate the three.

As in Kathak, Ma tells a story. The text is by Khan and a frequent collaborator, screenwriter Hanif Kureishi, best known for My Beautiful Launderette.

The story involves a dual notion of the Earth (in Hindi, Ma means both mother and Earth). The Earth is at once mother to us all - provider of food, water and air - and a child that humans must take care to nurture.

"The Earth has been speaking to us, complaining for awhile. As a civilization, we choose to be deaf to it," Khan said.

In Ma, Khan speaks back, hanging upside down at one point as he liked to do in childhood so his thoughts can flow into the ground.

Akram Khan Company performs Wednesday through Saturday, May 6 at 8 p.m. at Centre Pierre Peladeau, 300 de Maisonneuve Blvd. E. Tickets cost $38 to $45. Call (514) 987-6919.

Graphic

Colour Photo: DANSEDANSE.NET; Akram Khan's prizewinning Ma is an attempt to transform a fusion of dance, music and text into a contemporary idiom.

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